

News Release

Senators Pete Domenici & Jeff Bingaman

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MAY 26, 2000

N.M. SENATORS STAY ON COURSE FOR COMPREHENSIVE FIRE COMPENSATION BILL

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Senators Pete Domenici and Jeff Bingaman today said the new Interior Department assessment on the causes and handling of the Cerro Grande Fire only underscores the importance of their work to provide compensation to the victims of this government-caused blaze.

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt today issued an independent review panel report on the investigation into the Cerro Grande Fire. The report reiterated that the government is responsible for the fire that damaged parts of Los Alamos National Laboratory and burned hundreds of Los Alamos homes. In issuing the report, Babbitt also restricted the National Park Service from conducting so-called controlled burns. However, he will allow a 30-day moratorium on such burns to expire on June 12 for other federal agencies that deal with forest management.

"I'm happy they've taken the matches away from the National Park Service. We must still demand the utmost caution from the other agencies if they proceed with any more controlled burns in New Mexico or the Southwest," Domenici said. "In the mean time, this report only underscores the need for us to press for a complete and comprehensive compensation package for the fire victims. It also shows that we need better forest policies that protect the safety of our communities and improve forest health."

"The review board's findings affirm what we have known or suspected all along: major mistakes were made in planning and implementing the burn at Bandelier and the government is responsible for extensive damages," Bingaman said. "The board's findings will further boost our case when we seek a compensation package for fire victims from Congress in June."

At the Senators' request, a General Accounting Office (GAO) team is currently in New Mexico investigating the events leading to the fire, and outlining measures to prevent future fires. The GAO is the non-partisan government investigative arm of Congress.

The New Mexico Senators are currently working closely with the congressional delegation and the White House Office of Management and Budget to develop comprehensive legislation to compensate victims of the Cerro Grande Fire. The measure is being tailored specifically for New Mexico and will address fire recovery needs for the families, businesses, and local and tribal governments affected by the Cerro Grande Fire.